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EZEKIEL, THE PROPHET OF THE EXILE.

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Parentage, early life in Jerusalem, and exile.—False hopes in Jerusalem and among the exiles.—Called to be a prophet to the exiles.—The nature of his mission—the destruction of Jerusalem the dividing line in his work.—Teaching before the destruction of Jerusalem.—Later teaching.—Position among the prophets.

Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, first appears as an actor in biblical history when on that July day, B. C. 592, at Tel Abib, on the banks of the river Chebar in Babylonia, he was commissioned by Jehovah to act as his spokesman to the Jewish exiles. With a vision of Jehovah's majesty, unsurpassed in its beauty and glory even by the inaugural vision of his great predecessor Isaiah, the exiled Ezekiel was inaugurated into his great office. The roll given to him to eat, written on both sides with "lamentations and mourning and woe," was a symbol not only of his commission as the spokesman of Jehovah but also of the mournful character of his message. Small wonder that, overcome with emotion at what he had seen and heard, he sat dumb with astonishment for seven days among his associates, and needed a second call to convince him of the reality of his mission, and also of the tremendous responsibility which rested upon him as the divinely appointed watchman of his people.

Early life in Jerusalem.—But in order to understand Ezekiel's life and work it is necessary to know something of his early surroundings, somewhat more of the circumstances which preceded his call, and something of the condition of affairs in the community of the exiles. It is true that we have no exact data from which to form a picture of Ezekiel's early life, but still, by a sort of backward projection of the line of his life, we may be able to form some idea of the training of the future prophet. While probably too young to have any part in the great reformation of Josiah, yet a member of the priestly aristocracy as

he was, he must have been impressed with the spirit of that supreme effort of the noble king and his coadjutors to bring the nation back to the pure worship of Jehovah their God. He must have shared in that wave of despairing anguish which swept over the faithful of the land when their hero fell at the battle of Megiddo, and their country came under foreign domination. He must have sympathized with that struggle in which Jeremiah engaged, to hold the apostate king Jehoiakim faithful to Jehovah. We can picture the sorrow which filled the heart of the earnest young priest when Nebuchadrezzar, the victor of Carchemish and arbiter of the fate of western Asia, made his first draft upon the men and treasure of Jerusalem, which he carried away to Babylon in the reign of Jehoiakim. After a reign of eleven years Jehoiakim was succeeded by his youthful son Jehoiachin. The pathetic lament over the fate of the young lion in the nineteenth chapter of his prophecy leads us to infer that in common with other loyal hearts Ezekiel must have hoped for better things when the youthful Jehoiachin ascended the throne. But how soon were those hopes dashed to the ground! Jehoiachin's reign lasted barely three months. Nebuchadrezzar appeared before the city and took the young king captive, with his treasure, his mother, his wives and all the chief men of the land. With Jehoiachin, Ezekiel was carried to Babylonia. Together with many others of his fellow countrymen he was placed at Tel Abib on the banks of the Chebar, probably one of the streams or great canals of southern Babylonia. The condition of the exiles was not one of servitude. They seem to have enjoyed a reasonable amount of liberty, and to have been free to determine the affairs of their own community.

Affairs in Jerusalem and among the exiles.—Banishment did not prevent communication with the people still resident in Judea, and the interest of the exiles still centered itself about the city of Jerusalem. They regarded their captivity as a great calamity, and with confidence looked forward to a speedy restoration to their own land. These hopes were stimulated and strengthened by the declarations of their prophets. The message of Jeremiah, urging them to make permanent homes in the land of their exile on the ground that the captivity was to continue

seventy years, was received with scorn, and the authorities at Jerusalem were advised to silence the mad Jeremiah who presumed to make himself a prophet. In Jerusalem the fanaticism was even greater. The people stubbornly refused to regard their reverses as anything more than temporary. They refused to believe that Jehovah had forsaken his people—the temple and the holy city were their palladium. Disaster might, it was true, embarrass them temporarily, but Jehovah's city could not be destroyed. Their prophets even declared that in two years the power of Nebuchadrezzar should be broken and the glory of Jerusalem restored. And under the influence of such men Zedekiah was plotting to throw off the yoke of the king of Babylon. Amid such stirring circumstances Ezekiel passed the early years of his exile.

He was married and had a home of his own, and was probably a person of some importance in the community. So long as he was a silent spectator of the events we have no knowledge of his opinions on these great subjects which were agitating his fellow countrymen. But in the providence of God the time came when he was to be no longer a silent spectator. In the land of the exiles Jehovah needed a prophet to carry on the work of Jeremiah and his associates in Jerusalem. The young priest Ezekiel was the man chosen for the performance of this arduous task. His book preserves for us the record of his great work.

Called to be a prophet to the exiles.—Ezekiel was primarily the prophet of the exile. He addressed himself chiefly to his fellow exiles. His commission said, "Go, get thee to them of the captivity, unto the children of thy people." He had, it is true, a large conception of the future glory of his people, he hoped for a reunion of the dismembered realm and a restoration of the kingdom to the house of David, but he saw in the exiles the nucleus of the new nation. Consequently his efforts were all made with a view to their effect upon his associates. He had small hopes for any good results from the people still resident in Jerusalem. It was the exiles who were to be gathered from the lands of their captivity and to be established in the possession of the land of Israel. The restored captives were the ones to whom the glorious promise was given. "I will give them one heart,

and I will put a new spirit within you, and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh: that they may walk in my statutes, and keep my ordinances, and do them: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God." It is true that Ezekiel did not exclude the rest of the nation from his consideration, but the fact remains that he regarded the exiles as the real Israel; they were representatives of the house of Israel, because in them lay the ground for the hopes of a new Israel.

The substance at least of his addresses was in all probability actually delivered to real audiences; the messages which he received from Jehovah were spoken to his fellow exiles. The record of his life renders it impossible to accept the conclusion of Duhm that "the book of Ezekiel belongs only in a few passages to the prophetic literature."¹ Hengstenberg has a truer conception of Ezekiel's character when he calls him a "man who lifted up his voice like a trumpet and declared to Israel its sins, whose word fell like a hammer upon all the pleasant dreams and projects in which it had indulged, and crushed them to powder,—whose entire appearance furnished a powerful proof that the Lord was still among his people."²

The nature of his mission.—Ezekiel's mission was to teach the Jews of the captivity Jehovah's plan for the restoration of his people. Their hopes were set upon a speedy return from the exile and upon the rehabilitation of Jerusalem and Judea. It was Ezekiel's business to shatter these hopes, and to convince his associates that Jehovah had left his city and given it over to the conqueror as a punishment for its sins. Jerusalem stained with the blood of Jehovah's servants, Jerusalem defiled beyond description by her unfaithfulness to Jehovah must be overthrown. A complete breaking with the past was the indispensable condition of restoration to divine favor.

The destruction of Jerusalem forms the crisis in Ezekiel's life, the dividing line between the two phases of his prophetic activity. The prophecies of the early period are mainly declarations of impending doom. The message was unwelcome to his auditors. With stubborn fanaticism they refused to believe his words. Their opposition was not unexpected. In fact he had been told that

¹ *Theologie der Propheten*, p. 252.

² *Christology of Old Testament*, Vol. III., p. 3.

they would oppose him and had been commanded to deliver his message at all costs. But their opposition had the effect of limiting his activity. By divine command he was forbidden to continue the thankless task of a public reprovcr among them; he was directed to shut himself within his house and keep silence except when Jehovah gave him a message to deliver. From the time of his call in the fifth year of the captivity, 592 B. C., until the temporary cessation of his prophetic activity in the ninth year of the captivity, at the end of 588 B. C., there are a number of groups of prophetic utterances, concerned in the main with the one great theme—Israel's guilt and punishment. The first group connects itself with Ezekiel's call to the prophetic office; the second group of prophecies is dated about a year later in 591 B. C.; the next group belongs somewhat later but still in the same year; the next group is dated in the seventh year of the captivity in 590 B. C. The next date that is given is some two years later towards the end of the ninth year of the captivity, probably at the end of 588 or early in 587 B. C. The twenty-fourth chapter alone belongs to this period. The end so long predicted was at hand. Nebuchadrezzar's army had actually begun that final siege of the city which resulted in its complete destruction. The punishment so long impending was now to be inflicted, the sentence was at last to be put into execution. This date is marked by a sad event in Ezekiel's personal history. His wife, touchingly characterized as the "desire of his eyes," was suddenly taken away from him almost without warning. Forbidden to give outward evidence of his grief, he was told that thus he would be a sign of the unspeakable grief which should come upon the house of Israel, when the "desire of their eyes," their beloved city, was no more. With this utterance Ezekiel closed his long series of prophecies concerning Jerusalem. In silence he waited for the end, a silence divinely appointed and destined to continue until the messenger should declare the fulfillment of the prophecy in the overthrow of the city. That announcement should open the prophet's mouth, should be the seal of his divine mission, the proof of Jehovah's power, and the sign for the beginning of the second phase of the prophet's work.

This period under consideration is almost devoid of personal incident. It seems clear that the positive opposition gradually passed into indifference, and then into a kind of respect and consideration, but the import of the prophetic message was but little comprehended. Add to this increased importance the crushing domestic sorrow which came upon him at the end of this period, and a few symbolic actions which he seems to have performed, and we have all that we know of the prophet's life during these years.

Teaching before the destruction of Jerusalem.—It will be impossible to consider in detail the character of the various prophetic utterances and the nature of the prophetic action during these years. With all the variety of methods employed, with all the wealth of imagery at his command, the prophet repeated again and again a few great fundamental facts and truths which may be clearly traced in all the utterances of this period. The first and most evident of these truths is the one already indicated, the approaching destruction of Jerusalem. The pictured city, the siege with all its horrors, the burned and scattered hair, the flight by night through the hole in the wall, and above all the majestic vision of Jehovah's glory departing first from the temple, and then, after the edict for the destruction of all save those bearing Jehovah's mark had been promulgated, the withdrawal from the city itself—all proclaimed more forcibly than mere abstract propositions could do it, the truth so unwelcome to his hearers, that the apostate city was no longer the object of Jehovah's protection, but that it had been given over to its enemies. To these fanatical enthusiasts as to the self-righteous religionists of Amos's day, the prophet seemed to be predicting a moral impossibility. They were longing for the "day of Jehovah," a day which they fondly hoped would bring destruction to their enemies, to themselves exaltation. And, like Amos, Ezekiel had to declare that the day of Jehovah would be for them darkness and not light, a day of punishment and humiliation and not a day of vengeance and glorification. Long before the siege of Jerusalem had actually begun and while Zedekiah was to all appearances an obedient vassal, Ezekiel predicted the attempt of the king to

escape from the city by night, his capture and his cruel fate. He also told his hearers that Nebuchadrezzar had decided to attack Judea and Jerusalem rather than Ammon.

But, further, Ezekiel declared that the approaching doom was punitive. Under the picture of the foundling child weltering in its blood, which Jehovah spared, nourished and made his bride, only to be deserted and scorned, the prophet declares that Judah has been guilty of even worse sins than her sisters Samaria and Sodom. The whole history of Judah, from the time of the deliverance from Egypt, had been one of constant unfaithfulness to Jehovah her husband. Disgraceful as had been Samaria's conduct, Judah's had been indefinitely worse and hence the punishment was inevitable. Nor was this sin entirely a thing of the past. Jerusalem of the present day was given up to the most revolting idolatries. The very priests turned from Jehovah's shrine to worship the sun; in the chambers of the temple itself the images and pictures of all sorts of animals were revered, while the women bewailed Tammuz, the Phœnician Adonis. The perjured king who was false to the oath of allegiance which he had taken, the false prophets who misled the people, and the corrupt priests, all were engaged in deeds which demanded punishment. Nor is it ceremonial sins simply that the prophet describes and denounces. Oppression and injustice were rife, the grossest immorality prevailed, and the poor were ground down by the merciless exactions of the ruling classes. On every hand the cry for vengeance was going up to God.

But Ezekiel insisted upon another great truth. With a despairing fatalism the people declared that this punishment came not because of their own sins but because of the sins of their fathers. They were suffering the penalty of the sins of their ancestors. "The fathers had eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth were set on edge." Reform was useless if not impossible, repentance was a farce, "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die." Ezekiel meets them with a denial of the correctness of their statement. Punishment was coming, but each man should suffer for his own sins. The son shall not die for the sin of the father, nor the father for the sins of the son. Stern herald of approach-

ing judgment that he was, Ezekiel was also a preacher of the doctrine of repentance. Through the gloom of his denunciation an occasional ray of light breaks forth. A few of the hairs are to be preserved from destruction, a few residents of Jerusalem are spared, the exiles are to be restored to the land of Israel, even the faithless wife shall be forgiven, and anyone who will turn from the error of his ways shall live.

While the siege of Jerusalem was in progress Ezekiel uttered prophecies concerning foreign nations, the record of which is found in chapters twenty-five to thirty-two of his book. The doom of Ammon, Moab, Edom, and Philistia is pronounced, and the approaching conquest of Egypt and Tyre by Nebuchadrezzar is declared. But so far as Israel was concerned his public prophetic function was in abeyance. In the eleventh year of the captivity in the summer of 586 B. C. the city fell, the king was taken captive, and the city with the temple was destroyed. And still Ezekiel kept silence. In the early part of the year 584 or of 585 B. C., if the reading accepted by most critics be adopted, the messenger bearing the news of the destruction of the city arrived at Tel Abib. His arrival was the sign for opening the prophet's mouth. It marks also the beginning of the second phase of his ministry.

Later teaching.—The second period of Ezekiel's work opens with his reconsecration to the office of watchman. The function which he had hitherto been able to exercise only at intervals and in the face of opposition he was now to take up once more permanently and effectively. It is difficult to realize the despair which fell upon the people when the news of the destruction of the city reached them. They were prostrated at the calamity, they were hopeless for the future, "Our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we pine away in them; how then should we live?" With overwhelming force the truth of the prophet's denunciation came home to their hearts, fanatical confidence gave place to deepest despair. This was the prophet's opportunity. He had now to teach them, as Davidson says, that "The Lord had not made a full end of Israel. The old era was closed, but a new era was about to open, and a new Israel to arise."¹ The fate of their city had taught the Israelites that their position as

¹ The Book of Ezekiel, p. 238.

Jehovah's chosen people did not give them immunity from punishment for their sins. Amos years before had emphasized this thought as the very keynote of his prophecy, "You only have I known out of all the families of the earth ; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." But now the stern logic of experience had convinced the people of its truth. The hope for the future lay then not in any merit of Israel, but simply in Jehovah's pardoning and restoring grace. The new relationship was to be moral rather than physical. This fact is most clearly brought out in the wonderful vision of the valley of dry bones. Israel's hope was dead, their life was ended. But this vision conveys to the prophet and through him to the people, the fact that even from the grave, Jehovah will restore them and return them to their own land. Furthermore, he will re-unite the two kingdoms, with David as king. In that glorious future kingdom, the rulers who have in the past so cruelly abused and wilfully misled the people shall be replaced by a ruler who shall lead them in the way of Jehovah. The land is to be rescued from Edom and the other enemies of Israel who possess it, and is to be restored to its ancient owners and is to be blessed with marvelous fertility. Restored to their land and dwelling in security in unwall'd villages, the forces of their enemies shall unite in one grand attack in the attempt to overwhelm and destroy them. But Jehovah shall protect them, and the invading host shall be utterly overthrown.

All these visions and prophecies belong somewhere between the twelfth or eleventh year, and the twenty-fifth year of the captivity, probably nearer the former than the latter date. After a long silence in the twenty-fifth year of the captivity, twenty years after his call, the prophet practically closes his work with the account of the splendid vision of the life of Jehovah's people, "in their final condition of redemption and felicity," which is admirably summarized by Kirkpatrick as follows: "A nobler temple and a purer worship will be called into existence, answering to an ideal which had never yet been realized ; Jehovah will return to dwell in the midst of his regenerate people ; a life-giving stream will issue from the temple and fertilize the desert ; the curse of barrenness will be removed."¹

¹ *The Doctrine of the Prophets*, p. 336.

Only one later utterance of his is preserved for us. In the twenty-seventh year of the captivity, in 570 B. C., he uttered a final oracle concerning Egypt. The prophet declares that in the land of Egypt Nebuchadrezzar and his army shall find the reward for their long and fruitless siege of Tyre. With this declaration he passes from our view and his subsequent life and the date and circumstances of his death are utterly unknown. Tradition has attempted to increase our knowledge by the story of his murder by a fellow exile whom he had opposed, but the tradition is probably baseless.

Such, then, in brief was the life and work of the prophet Ezekiel. His peculiar style with its rich imagery, its detailed descriptions, its tendency to repetition, especially of set words and phrases, its occasional lack of delicacy and its strongly ritualistic cast, has had the effect of rendering Ezekiel less attractive to most readers than some of the other prophets, and has caused him to be compared to his disadvantage with Isaiah and Jeremiah. But admitting these defects, they are after all only superficial blemishes. The facts do not seem to warrant the conclusion that Ezekiel was a man of books merely, a writer and not a prophet. The record of his life would seem to prove the contrary. It is impossible to read his accounts of his commission as watchman to the house of Israel without being impressed with the fact that he appreciated the dignity and the tremendous responsibility of his position. With all his idiosyncrasies he was a man of intense moral earnestness. Almost single handed he opposed the short-sighted optimism of his people, and with his stern blows shattered their fond hopes. But when hope had given way to despair, he threw himself just as earnestly into the task of preparing the way for the future restoration. As a prophet of God who faithfully discharged his duty amid peculiarly trying circumstances, Ezekiel well deserves the honorable position he holds in that glorious company of prophets at whose head we place the peerless Isaiah. From the day when God appeared to him on the banks of the Chebar until the time of his last appearance on the stage of history he ceased not to proclaim to his people the word of Jehovah.